



## Green Spaces and Active Transportation



Health Equity Impact Assessment  
in the 2014 Toronto Mayoral Election  
Wellesley Institute

Usable green spaces and being able to walk or bike around your neighbourhood to get to work or to pick up groceries makes a city livable. Toronto calls itself “a city within a park” and its patterns of development and street design incorporate the provision of parks and green spaces, as well as bike lanes and sidewalks. And though the parks system covers approximately 13 percent of the city’s land area, which includes more than 1,600 public parks and an extensive ravine system,<sup>1</sup> there are challenges that need to be addressed.

Toronto’s major rain and ice storm in late 2013 caused extensive damage to the city’s tree canopy and urban forest. Prior to the storms, Toronto had 10.2 million trees, providing approximately 27 percent tree canopy cover. The magnitude of the damage to the tree canopy is still not clear, but extensive maintenance and replanting is required.<sup>2</sup> Our tree canopy provides much needed shade in the summertime and helps to clean the air that we breathe.

The City’s Parks and Recreation Division reports that it does not have adequate resources to proactively care for Toronto’s tree canopy.<sup>3</sup> In 2004, and again in 2013, the City committed to increasing tree canopy coverage across the city to between 30 and 40 percent. In order to achieve and sustain the goal of 40 percent tree coverage, approximately 570,000 trees would have to be planted per year.<sup>4</sup>

Toronto adopted an official Bike Plan in 2001 which aimed to create a city-wide cycling network of on-road and off-road bikeways, improve signage and parking, and to expand the network of painted bicycle lanes, off-road trails and shared roadways.<sup>5</sup> Currently, there are 536.5 lane kilometers of on-street bikeways, and 294.1 trail kilometers.<sup>6</sup> Despite this, Toronto’s cycle network is not well connected and does not facilitate cycling outside of the downtown core.<sup>7</sup>

Walkability is typically measured by residential density, traffic density, proximity of walkable destinations, and land use mix.<sup>8</sup> Walkable neighbourhoods can facilitate physical activity, access to jobs, school, and essential services, and social interaction. Walkability in Toronto varies across neighbourhoods. While the downtown core is highly walkable, many areas of the inner suburbs that are home to larger numbers of low income people are not.<sup>9</sup>

**A health-enhancing green spaces and active transportation plan would commit to protecting and expanding Toronto's green spaces and active transportation networks.**

## Health Impacts of Green Spaces and Active Transportation

Access to parks, gardens and other public green spaces play a vital role to our health. They can lead to increased physical activity and relaxation, which are associated with health benefits such as lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels, reduced risk of cardiovascular disease and type II diabetes, enhanced survival after a heart attack or more rapid recovery from surgery, fewer minor medical complaints and lower self-reported stress. Additionally, parks and public spaces can help to build healthy communities, contributing to stable neighbourhoods and social connections.<sup>10</sup>

There is extensive evidence that having access to green spaces can contribute to good mental health. Research has shown that people living near green spaces report better mental health than people living in densely urbanized areas with low access to green spaces.<sup>11</sup> People who live in greener settings have also been shown to be more effective at managing major life issues.<sup>12</sup>

Urban forests play an active role improving and mitigating health risks. Trees improve air quality by removing atmospheric carbon dioxide, absorbing air pollutants, and producing oxygen.<sup>13</sup> Air pollution poses a threat to the health of those living in cities, contributing to asthma, coughing, headaches, respiratory heart disease, and some cancers.<sup>14</sup> Trees also provide shade control, which limit exposure to ultra violet radiation, which can lead to sunburns, skin cancer, and cataracts.<sup>15</sup> Trees also help to reduce extreme urban temperatures, which can contribute to heat rash, sunburn, fainting and heat exhaustion, which can lead to increased mortality.<sup>16</sup>

Active transportation networks, such as sidewalks, paths, and bike lanes, encourage residents to walk and cycle, reducing the risk of a number of chronic diseases, cardiovascular disease, obesity, type II diabetes, and certain types of cancer. Active transportation also has a positive effect on mental health, as physical activity can reduce the symptoms of depression, anxiety, and panic disorders.<sup>17</sup>

## Health Equity Impacts of Green Spaces and Active Transportation

Not all populations and neighbourhoods in Toronto have equitable access to green spaces and active transportation networks. For example, the former City of Toronto has active transportation rates that are three times higher than in North York, Scarborough and Etobicoke. Additionally, the northern and eastern parts of the city have fewer bicycle facilities compared to south-central Toronto where bicycle lanes and paths are more concentrated.<sup>18</sup>

In Toronto, evidence suggests that lower income neighbourhoods are more likely to lack opportunities for physical activity and have fewer green spaces compared to neighbourhoods that are better off. Toronto's inner suburbs, which have some of the highest rates of poverty in the city, also have fewer green spaces and opportunities to participate in active transportation, which may contribute to poorer health for residents.<sup>19</sup> There is extensive evidence that people with lower income are already at greater risk of many chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular disease and type II diabetes – living in neighbourhoods that lack green spaces and active transportation options may further increase these risks. Newcomers to Canada often have lower income than other Torontonians and may be more likely to live in low-income neighbourhoods and experience poorer health owing to a lack of green spaces and active transportation options.<sup>20</sup> A study examining walkability and diabetes in Toronto found that recent immigrants living in poorly connected areas had diabetes incidence rates that were more than 50 percent higher than those living in the most walkable areas.<sup>21</sup>

Children may be at particular risk of poor health owing to a lack of green spaces and active transportation. Greater neighbourhood walkability is associated with higher levels of physical activity among youth both as a method of active transportation, for example, walking or cycling to and from school, and for leisure.<sup>22</sup> In Toronto, many low income neighbourhoods also have low walkability, which may place children in these neighbourhoods at greater risk of poor health.<sup>23</sup> Safety concerns are also a factor of decreased levels of active transportation among children. In a survey of residents living in Toronto's low-income high-rise neighbourhoods, only 24 percent of parents reported feeling comfortable letting their children walk unaccompanied in their neighbourhoods.<sup>24</sup>

Seniors also benefit from green spaces and safe and maintained active transportation networks. Green spaces can provide communities with important locations for social interactions, which can contribute to lower levels of anxiety and depression among seniors.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, as seniors age the ability to walk to local shops to complete basic daily tasks like food shopping are critical to good physical and mental health.

# How do Toronto's Leading Mayoral Candidates Measure Up for Equity in Green Spaces and Active Transportation?

	 <b>Chow</b>	 <b>Ford</b>	 <b>Tory</b>
<b>Parks</b>	<p>Create online access to parks permits and ferry tickets.</p> <p>Cut red tape for larger events such as parades, festivals, markets and arts events.</p> <p>Waive fees and cover insurance costs for friends-of-parks groups to hold fundraising events in parks.</p> <p>Encourage residents to report park maintenance problems by posting the name and contact information of the staff person responsible.</p>	Not yet addressed.	Not yet addressed.
<b>Urban Forestry</b>	<p>Increase the city's tree planting budget by 50% and work with charitable partners, the corporate sector and community organizations to plant one million trees over ten years.</p>	Not yet addressed.	Maintain the city's 2012 tree cover of 28 percent by planting 3.8 million trees over the next 10 years.
<b>Walkability</b>	<p>Set a target of zero pedestrian fatalities.</p> <p>Give neighbourhoods control of speed limits by allowing them to lower limits by 10km/h.</p> <p>Make the 100 most dangerous intersections safer with longer crossing times and better lighting to help seniors.</p> <p>Make curbs squared or right-angled, forcing cars to turn more slowly.</p>	Not yet addressed.	Not yet addressed.
<b>Cycling</b>	<p>Build 200km of separated or designated bike lanes and boulevards within four years.</p> <p>Fast-track pilot projects for separated bike lanes on downtown streets.</p> <p>Improve maintenance of bike lanes, including fixing potholes and better snow removal.</p> <p>Improve bike parking at transit stations.</p> <p>Lobby Transport Canada to mandate side-guards on trucks and promote them on city-owned trucks.</p>	Not yet addressed.	Not yet addressed.

## Green Spaces and Active Transportation for a Healthier Toronto

Having access to green spaces and having active transportation options are important for good health. Despite this, of the three main mayoral candidates **Chow** is the only candidate who has included Toronto's parks, walkability and cycling in their platform. Only **Chow** and **Tory** have addressed Toronto's tree canopy.

A major theme of **Chow's** parks platform is reducing administrative barriers to access and participation, such as getting permits to use parks for events like birthday parties and picnics. Chow wants friends-of-parks groups to have greater ability use parks for events like farmers' markets, in addition to waiving park fees and insurance costs of these groups' fundraising activities in city parks. The City would also be more accessible to voice concerns or problems, as contact information for staff responsible will be posted. **Doug Ford and John Tory have not yet addressed parks.**

**Chow and Tory** have both committed to reinvest in Toronto's tree coverage in order to restore it from the 2013 rain and ice storm. Tory is taking a more aggressive approach and has committed to planting 380,000 trees annually over ten years to reach the 2012 tree cover of 28 percent. Chow has committed plant a million trees over ten years, to be financed by recovering the full cost of treating water that is discharged by businesses. Chow would also work with charitable partners, the corporate sector and community organizations to plant trees. **Doug Ford has not addressed urban forestry or restoring Toronto's tree canopy.**

**Chow** has committed to improving and expanding active transportation networks in Toronto. She wants to make walking safer by aiming for zero pedestrian fatalities. This will be achieved by giving neighbourhoods the ability to lower speed limits by 10km/h, which may make walking a more attractive to people who feel unsafe. Selected dangerous intersections will be improved by implementing longer crossing times for seniors and adding better lighting for visibility. Changing curb design from round to squared or right-angled may slow traffic and increase pedestrian safety. While these initiatives may make the city more walkable, Chow has not yet addressed how she would improve walking options in neighbourhoods that have little physical infrastructure like sidewalks or that do not have walking access to essential services like grocery stores. **Doug Ford and John Tory have not yet addressed walkability.**

Chow has committed to creating a bike grid by building 200 kilometres of separated or designated bike lanes within four years and fast-tracking pilot projects for separated bike lanes on downtown streets. Chow has recognized the need to improve and maintain existing infrastructure by fixing potholes to decrease accidents and increasing snow removal to allow for safe all year biking. While these initiatives may increase cycling options in Toronto, it is important to note that Chow has proposed that they be funded by reallocations within the existing capital budget for cycling. Additionally, while Chow is calling on Transport Canada to mandate side guards on trucks she has only said that she would 'promote' guards on City-owned trucks. **Doug Ford and John Tory have not yet addressed cycling.**

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## ENDNOTES

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